

NOTE ON A PECULIAR EFFECT OF THE BROMIDES UPON CERTAIN INSANE EPILEPTICS.*

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THE action of the bromides is generally supposed to be to lessen cerebral excitement and the activity of the spinal reflexes, through an influence on the vaso-motor mechanisms of the great nervous centres. Its therapeutic action in epilepsy is supposed to depend on some regulating effect on the vaso-motor centres in the medulla, and this to be in the nature of a sedative to the circulation. I am not aware of any publication of its effects as a cerebral excitant in this disorder, or any statement that its administration is followed by symptoms of excitement or furious intoxication.¹ A considerable experience with epilepsy in private and dispensary practice had about confirmed my faith in the usually accepted views as to the effects of the bromides, and I was therefore surprised to hear, when proposing to employ the usual treatment in the case of an epileptic patient in this hospital, that the bromide medication was followed in this case by furious excitement and genuine epileptic mania. The patient, G. L., was a powerfully built man of about thirty years, in robust general health, but liable to very frequent attacks of the *grand mal*, not, however, as a rule, very severe. Beyond a slight

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¹I would here except the mention of mania following the use of bromides by Dr. Hammond in his treatise on nervous diseases, which did not occur to me when I first wrote this paper.

degree of general mental weakness, there are no very pronounced psychic symptoms, no delusions; he is trustworthy and ordinarily peaceable, and, like most of the other epileptics in the hospital, he is very religiously inclined. His attacks, even the most severe ones, are followed by only a very temporary dazed or confused condition, lasting from a minute or two to perhaps half an hour at the most, and between them he is as well as ever. He says he never had a headache in his life. He is temperate, not using even tobacco, and, on the whole, a very good patient for an insane asylum. His very frequent attacks, to which he has been subject for twenty-seven years, have naturally suggested treatment with the bromides, and it has been repeatedly tried in the hospital, with the effect of stopping his convulsions, it is true, but, at the same time, rendering him liable to attacks of genuine epileptic furor, and making him generally a very unsafe patient. He had, prior to his committal to an asylum, taken enormous quantities of the bromides, and he was declared homicidal in the verdict on which he was received.

Dr. H. N. Moyer, who had had the immediate care of the patient for nearly a year, and who had made the previous observations on the effects of the bromides upon him, told me that with large doses (3 ss *ter die*) he could be made almost unmanageable in three or four days; with small ones two or three weeks might be required. On one occasion he almost completely wrecked a screen room into which he was placed in one of his attacks of fury, in a few minutes tearing out, with his naked hands, lathing and plaster, and even beginning to make way with the window and door casings before he could be subdued. The stoppage of the bromide medication in every instance caused a complete subsidence of all such unpleasant symptoms, and the reappearance of his epileptic attacks.

Being somewhat curious in regard to these facts, though I could not discredit them, I resolved to observe the effects of the medicine upon the patient myself, and ordered for him Seguin's prescription of ten grains of the potassium and five grains of the ammonium bromide in an alkaline solution three times a day. The effect on his general condition was excellent; there were none of the unpleasant phenomena of bromism, not even an acne pimple, so far as observed. The attacks, which had been as frequent as two or three a week, ceased almost entirely, his mind seemed to brighten, he became somewhat more active physically, his functions were all regular, his pulse was all the while normal, circulation and sleep good. But with this general physical and mental improvement in most respects, there gradually appeared an offensive self-importance and quarrelsomeness; and after some three weeks of the treatment he was a very disagreeable and decidedly dangerous lunatic; and after he had made an unprovoked assault upon an attendant, and had nearly torn the clothes off from him, it was not considered advisable to continue it any longer. The patient was, a few days after the discontinuance of the medicine, the same rational and manageable subject as before, with also the former frequency of his epileptic attacks.

Two other epileptics in the hospital were reported to exhibit the same idiosyncrasy as regards the effect upon them of the bromides, and, as far as I have observed, correctly. One of these, a semi-demented case, became under the treatment exceedingly talkative and troublesome, though never dangerously violent. The other was always liable to violent outbursts of temper, and he was cautiously tried with hydrobromic acid in moderate doses, with the apparent effect of increasing this tendency. One or two other epileptic cases were not benefited by the bromides, but

none of the others in the hospital showed any such results of treatment with these drugs as did the cases I have mentioned. In the case of G. L. they have been observed by Dr. Moyer to follow the administration of potassium, sodium, and ammonium bromides, both when used separately and in combination with each other.

The large proportion of cases showing this idiosyncrasy—3 out of 21 epileptic patients in the hospital—would appear to indicate that it is not very rare, yet, as I have said in the beginning, I have not seen in print any mention of it. It has undoubtedly been observed before, and, in fact, I have the verbal testimony of Drs. J. S. Jewell and J. G. Kiernan, of Chicago, that they have observed similar cases to the ones I have mentioned above. It is not at all strange that such cases should be more frequent among the epileptics in an insane hospital than among the ordinary subjects of the disorder, for the former class are generally those whose violent manifestations have led to their seclusion as dangerous lunatics. It is easy to suppose that the bromide medication may have been indirectly the main cause of the commitment as insane in the case of G. L., though there is no real evidence that such was the case.

The fact that in these cases the suppression of the epileptic attacks by the bromides was accompanied by cerebral excitement and outbursts of maniacal furor, is strongly suggestive that the attacks themselves are somewhat of the nature of a safety-valve in some cases, and that the epilepsy is itself an alternative to acute and dangerous mania. Bad as it is, it may be the better alternative. The cerebral excitement is perhaps not to be ascribed directly to the medicine, but is secondary to its usual therapeutic effect—the suppression of the fits,—and this may be the best explanation of the phenomena. I leave these suggestions, however, as simply suggestions, and offer the facts themselves as

illustrating a possible action of the bromides in epilepsy that has not, to my knowledge, been very prominently brought before the profession.

It is my intention to make, with the coöperation of Dr. R. S. Dewey and Dr. Moyer, some further observations on the effects of treatment of this class of cases, and the above may be considered as merely a preliminary communication.